

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-5

47/1 Ngamwongwan Road
Bangkok 9, Thailand
October 19, 1973

"A Human Shape over a Demon's Heart"

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The above quotation, from a poem by Thailand's great King Rama VI, seems to me appropriate for this past week's tragic events. The carnage of Sunday and Monday have made it possible for the whole world to see the fiendish savagery of the creatures that American guns and American money have perpetuated in power for these many years in Thailand. As long as the instruments of murder, and the subtler but in the long run more effective tools of persuasion, were directed toward poor, inarticulate, low status farmers, far from newspapers and television, no cry was heard in opposition: they were "communists." It was a different story when the bullets began on Sunday to rip into the bodies of college students, who had, with equal (or equal lack of) justification been assailed as "communists" and "traitors" by the military regime.

Appropriately enough today, Prapat and Narong have fled to Taiwan, and Thanom to the United States. Less than one hundred hours ago these men were America's chosen instruments for protecting democracy and freedom in Asia. This at least was the claim of those who furnished the resources for Thanom, Prapat and Narong. Not much is new in the world, though, least of all in ways of iniquity and falsehood. The parable for America's support of the oligarchs was written nineteen centuries ago: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."

This parable from Matthew tells us how to read from the blood in Bangkok's streets the true intentions of the men in Washington and Bangkok, despite their sweet pronouncements.

Since we have lived through this incredible last few days, and through the last year which led up to them, I'd like to share my observations with the world. We have been most fortunate in that Chum's students at the university across the street have stayed in constant contact with us. Friends throughout the city, some of them on the staffs of the hospitals treating the wounded, have also been in contact by phone.

I think the Bangkok Post, on the morning of October 16, summed up the feelings of most Thai in its banner headline: "Thanom, Prapat, Narong flee country -- The three most hated men in Thailand." Until they fled, of course, they had been, respectively, prime minister, deputy prime minister, and prime-minister-apparent. Another paper, the Nation, proclaimed in a front page editorial that October 15 was "our greatest day," comparing it in importance to December 10, 1932, the end of the absolute monarchy in Thailand. I believe it extremely significant, and a measure of the

gravity of the crisis of the last few days, that the result which finally occurred came about only through the unprecedented intervention of the universally respected monarch, King Bhumipol Adulyadej. During previous domestic convulsions, as during previous conflicts between the military regime and the people, the monarch has always maintained a scrupulous neutrality, while at the same time showing his disapproval of the regime by keeping as distant as possible from them in public association.

The collapse of the military oligarchy was appropriately Thai: years upon years of peaceful, if cynical, toleration, abruptly terminated by a few days of stunning violence, unseen in Thai domestic politics since the days of the long-abandoned capital of Ayuthaya, where kings slew their royal relatives to forestall attempts on the throne. Even into the regime's last hours few believed possible the end which finally resulted on Tuesday: the consolidation of a civilian prime minister and cabinet.

Nevertheless, it had become increasingly apparent over the last year that the regime's final days were at hand, though the expectation was that the ever clumsier elders, Prime Minister Field Marshal Thanom, and Deputy Prime Minister Field Marshal Prapat, would be replaced by demagogic Lieutenant Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, son of Thanom and son-in-law of Prapat. The decisive elements in the final outcome appear to have been the newly assertive role of the king, the intransigent refusal of the crowds, at times numbering more than 400,000, to accept the continuance of Field Marshal Thanom as supreme commander of the armed forces despite his resignation as prime minister, and splits within the military and police.

The current round of the struggle began on October 6 with the arrest of 12 (later 13) students and intellectuals for passing out pamphlets urging the speedy adoption of a constitution. The constitutional activists were initially charged with violating a law forbidding the assembly of five or more persons for political purposes, but this was later changed to treason as the police discovered alleged documentary evidence of a communist plot to overthrow the government.

Initial limited student protests were met by equivocations and contradictory claims on the part of officials, indicating that the latter were still attempting to frame a case. As the protesters increased in number to more than 50,000 there were official hints that some of the activists were "dupes" who would be released after minor fines while the real plotters (presumably non-students) would suffer penalties under the martial law absolute powers. The government produced on television the incriminating evidence, consisting of a copy of "The History of the Thai Communist Party" and a volume of Mao. Newspapers immediately pointed out that any political science student might have such works in his possession.

The continued vacillations of the official story, and the resort, for the hundredth time by the generals, to the cry of "communist wolf," spurred public cynicism and crowds continued to grow at the campus of Thammasat University, founded by the leaders of the 1932 coup which overthrew the absolute monarchy. Public support for the protest increased and Major General Sanga Kittikachorn, brother of the prime minister, publicly criticized the government for making a big issue out of nothing.

Talks on Thursday, October 11, between student leaders and Marshal Prapat broke down over the government's refusal of an unconditional release for the constitutional activists, and Friday arrived as a day of confrontation. Crowds swelled to 200,000 at Thammasat, and the government was given an ultimatum to release the detainees. The

government in turn prepared for a massive crackdown by ordering military units from outlying areas into Bangkok and warning hospitals to be ready for casualties.

As the Saturday noon deadline arrived without word of the arrested, the largest demonstration in Thai history began, as a crowd of 400,000 demonstrators began a meticulously organized and marshalled march from the university campus to the royal palace. In fact the arrested were being physically ejected from their cells at almost that moment (they refused to leave without word from the National Student Center), but word of their release was not broadcast in time to avert the march. At four in the afternoon nine student leaders were granted an audience with the king, who asked them to call off the march since the arrested constitutional activists had been released. Three of the nine then proceeded to meet with Marshal Prapat to agree on truce terms, and the latter assented to a constitution within one year.

Communication difficulties held up announcement of the truce agreement for several hours, but when the terms were finally announced, most of the crowd dispersed, leaving nevertheless some 80,000 demonstrators around the palace who were dissatisfied with the one-year delay in granting the constitution. (As one of the newspapers had pointed out the week before, Thailand has more experience than almost any other country in writing constitutions, so there was no justification for the long interval.)

As the City of the Angels went to sleep Saturday night, most believed that the latest political crisis had been defused at the last moment by the same technique as in previous crises: yielding at the brink to concrete demands (in this case release of the arrested constitutional activists) plus vague promises for a constitution at a safely remote date in the future. Instead the city awoke to news of a massacre at the palace grounds, apparently a case of bungling by U.S.-trained riot police. Tempers rose rapidly as word spread, and crowds began to increase in size. Within a few hours battles were raging at several points in the city, with army and police units loyal to Thanom and Prapat using machine guns, tanks and helicopter gunships, all provided under the American aid program (more than three-quarters of a billion dollars worth) to fire on the demonstrators.

I realize it sounds exaggerated and melodramatic to recount the situation this way: how could any rulers, no matter how depraved and drunk with their own power, mow down unarmed students with tanks and helicopter gunships? The horrifying fact is that this happened. A few gruesome incidents which have been seen either with our own eyes or those of colleagues at Kasetsart University (in some cases these happened to relatives of the colleagues):

1. When tanks pulled into stately Rajdamnoen Avenue, which runs from the Parliament to the Grand Palace, four girl students, in their school uniforms, lay in the street in non-violent protest. They were crushed to death.
2. One individual not connected with the demonstration was leaving his house when tanks pulled into his street and sprayed the area with bullets. His body was cut in half.
3. Soldiers announced that students leaving the Thammasat campus by 6:00 pm would not be harmed. The first group out, carrying a white flag, were shot down.
4. At the Democracy Monument students ascended the platform one by one to appeal over the public address system to soldiers not to fire on a non-violent protest. They were shot down, one by one, by soldiers with rifles.

5. Demonstrators jumped into the Chao Phya River to escape (a daring thing to do during the rainy season); they were shot in the water by helicopter gunships. Two nurses were shot by helicopters in the grounds of Siriraj Hospital, on the opposite bank of the river from Thammasat.
6. Soldiers broke into Siriraj Hospital looking for students to shoot.

Space is insufficient to recount more of the heart-rending acts of wanton destruction and cruelty which took place on that day. As a result of such actions by late afternoon battle deaths amounted to hundreds, and total casualties were near a thousand. The Rajdamnoen area resembled a war zone: corpses, gutted buildings, still smoldering vehicles, and barricades manned by demonstrators. It was the worst political violence in modern Thai history, and it stunned the nation.

At 7:15 pm King Bhumipol appeared on television to announce to the country that he had appointed Professor Sanya Thammasak, Rector of Thammasat University, to be prime minister to replace Field Marshal Thanom who had resigned. The king also appealed to all parties to cease the violence. However, Marshal Thanom remained as supreme commander, that is, the real power in the country; the crowds refused to disperse, and the fighting continued into the night.

We have since been told by a high official of Kasetsart University (and this story has been confirmed by another source) that the original plan of the military leaders that night was to turn off all the power in the city of Bangkok and, under cover of darkness and the curfew which they had just imposed, to surround the universities, enter with soldiers, and kill everyone inside. This official was warned early in the evening to leave the university compound, where his house is located, so as not to be included in the slaughter. The plan, which would have meant tens of thousands of deaths, had to be aborted because the navy, and possibly the air force, would not go along. Our house is right next to Kasetsart, and we saw the soldiers out there Sunday night, possibly preparing for this assault.

During the night the army seized control of the country's radio stations and issued orders to broadcast no news except that provided by the Public Relations Department, then under the control of the Supreme Command. During Monday morning a series of patently phony broadcasts was made: that the army was no longer fighting student demonstrators but "communist terrorists" who had infiltrated Bangkok; that the "rumors" (in fact newspaper and radio reports) of the army and police firing on students were false and not to be believed, etc. Significantly, all the announcements were in the name of the Supreme Command, not the new civilian prime minister. I called a number of radio stations to ask how they could be broadcasting such lies and was told in each case that they knew they were lies, but the military was there to insist that the tapes be played. Inexplicably, the military had failed to seize the newspapers or cut telephonic communications, so the truth of the continuing military plot, in defiance of the king and the prime minister, was freely communicated.

Public feelings were running very high on Monday, with funds being collected in enormous amounts throughout the city to support the demonstrators, and with thousands donating blood in response to student appeals. Hospitals finally ran out of sterile bottles to take blood and had to turn donors away. There are a number of documented instances of military and police killing medical personnel, in white uniforms and carrying the Red Cross flags, who were treating wounded demonstrators. Apparently in response hospitals were reported to be refusing to accept military and police casualties. (Many blood donors also specified that their blood was not to be used for mili-

tary or police personnel -- these shocking violations of medical ethics give some idea of the passions on Monday.)

The turning point came during an afternoon meeting of Thanom, Prapat, Narong, and General Kris Sivara, Army Commander-in-Chief. The former demanded that Kris call in more army units from outside Bangkok to use "absolute measures" (Thanom's words) against the demonstrators. Checks were made by radio with the headquarters of the other military and paramilitary forces. Air Force, Navy, and the elite Border Patrol Police headquarters replied that they were standing by for orders from the king, not the generals. Kris's consequent refusal to order the new army units into action doomed the trio of Thanom, Prapat and Narong to exile.

At 6:30 pm a radio announcement, this time over the name of the prime minister, stated that Field Marshals Thanom and Prapat had resigned all their government positions and left the country, along with Colonel Narong. Violence subsided with astonishing rapidity, and within less than two hours the 10:00 pm curfew, imposed the previous night, was lifted. In fact the exiled leaders and some 20 members of their families, with ten busloads of luggage, were still waiting under heavy guard at Bangkok's Don Muang airport. Prapat and Narong, and their families, left at 9:47 pm Monday night for Taiwan aboard a Thai International plane called back in midflight from its scheduled trip to Malaysia. (The 100 passengers were put on other planes.) Thanom and his family inexplicably remained on Thai soil for one more day before flying to exile in the United States, where his family had already purchased a home.

Just before embarking on his flight into exile, Thanom's son-in-law, Dr. Suvit Yodmanee, was reported to have said to someone who came to see him off, "It was not until this critical moment that we realized that we have no friends." If in fact he said this, it was only the ruling generals and the American Embassy political section who could have believed otherwise. Although no one foresaw the end of military rule, it had more and more openly and frequently been stated during the preceding year that Thanom and Prapat were losing their grip (there had never been any question of their popularity, except in official circles). Until the last moment Prapat still did not understand what had gone wrong. He was heard saying to his son-in-law Narong on the way to the airport, "How can they do this to daddy? The Thai are treating me just like an Arab guerrilla."

The beginning of the end probably started with the November 1971 "coup against themselves" in which the generals threw out the constitution adopted less than three years before (after ten years in the writing), abolished the annoying National Assembly, reestablished absolute power under martial law, and froze out inside critics like Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, who had been arguing for a new foreign policy orientation in the wake of the imminent American force reduction in Southeast Asia. The government's reappointment of Chamnan Yuvapurn as mayor of Bangkok further increased public hostility and cynicism, since Chamnan had been implicated earlier in a \$10 million land scandal and had escaped the short arm of the Thai law only by being appointed Thai Ambassador to Argentina as one of the final acts of the military regime before the promulgation of the constitution. (Chamnan is now in hiding and reportedly anxious that his extensive real estate holdings in Bangkok are about to be expropriated.)

Then on April 29, 1973 a Thai army helicopter crashed about 50 miles west of Bangkok, killing six high-ranking military and police officials and injuring five others. Newspaper investigations revealed that the helicopter had been returning from an illegal

hunting party organized by government officials and including business executives, girl friends and a movie star. The hunt (and subsequent late-night revels) had been conducted against rare protected species in a government game preserve, with the aid of government helicopters, vehicles, and electric generators for entertainment at night. In response to persistent questioning the government continued to assert that the party was on a "secret mission" when the incident occurred. A campaign of intimidation, telephone threats and violence failed to stem newspaper reports (though it did send a number of witnesses into hiding), and "secret mission" became a public codeword for cynical abuse of power. The declining respect for the ruling generals, and more importantly, the declining fear of them even within the government, were demonstrated when both a province governor and a high police official publicly expressed doubts about the cover story.

Following on this catastrophe came an enormous student demonstration in June, the largest in the history of the country up until that time, over the expulsion from Ramkhamhaeng University of nine students for publishing a satirical magazine critical of the government. Thugs again failed to stop the protest, and the government brought further derision on itself by assailing an alleged "third hand" behind the demonstrations. Like "secret mission" before it, the "third hand" was overnight on everyone's lips and in every newspaper, in ironical references to the "hand's" responsibility for everything from water pollution to bad weather: the public's way of signalling their awareness of the generals' contempt for their intelligence. The government was finally forced to back down, with enormous loss of face, by reinstating the expelled students, accepting the resignation of the rector who had expelled them, and instituting an investigation to determine who had hired the thugs to beat up the students. (There was never any question: witnesses said they went to the rector's office after completing their job.)

Only a few weeks ago university populations were further aggravated by a new "gag rule" forbidding outside speakers at university events without prior permission. Supporting the students were older intellectuals, led by M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, editor of the prestigious paper Siam Rath and confidant of the king. Kukrit had written of the government's loss of "moral authority" and had openly accused it of lying to the people on the helicopter hunting scandal.

Far more serious than the alienation of the intellectuals, however, was loss of confidence among lower military officers, laborers, and the business community. For some time the government had been suffering heavy casualties in ill-conceived military campaigns against dissident hilltribesmen. In the tribal North, as in the ethnic Thai provinces of the Northeast adjoining Laos, the so-called "communist terrorists" continued to consolidate their positions and increase their strength.

Bread and butter issues -- or more exactly, rice and fish sauce issues -- lay at the root of the regime's growing unpopularity among the working groups. Worldwide inflation and poor crop yields elsewhere had been responsible for a doubling of the rice price, and a 14% general increase in the cost of living, over the preceding year, increases of a magnitude unseen since the post-World War II inflation. Nevertheless the government, widely thought to be in collusion with trading firms, continued rice exports; verbal brawling in public between heir-apparent Narong and cabinet ministers over governmental incompetence in handling the rice crisis further damaged the regime's falling prestige. An equally unprecedented spate of labor unrest arose in response to

the inflation and new regulations permitting "worker's associations" (unions remain illegal in Thailand). Narong's public accusations that Labor Department officials were in the pay of employers, and his father-in-law's angry reply that Narong was "irresponsible," of course did nothing to enhance their standing with the public.

As unsettling as these sources of dissatisfaction were, they were compounded by growing criticism from the nation's business community, long a reliable pillar of the oligarchy. Boonchu Rojanasathien and Paul Sithi-Amnuai, high officials of the Bangkok Bank, the nation's largest bank and de facto head of the powerful banking cartel, openly spoke out against the generals' tax, finance and development policies. At lower levels dissatisfaction grew over the seemingly boundless greed of the generals, flagrant even by Thailand's gentle standards of business ethics. Particularly grievous was the tactic of collecting bribes from all contenders for a project, permit or appointment, while delivering to only one, an unforgiveable sin in a society rigorously conscious of social reciprocity. It was open knowledge that ten percent of the face value of major international contracts had to be deposited in a Swiss bank account; one official of the Canadian Embassy commercial section told me that Canadian companies had complained about this but there was nothing to be done.

Thus it was becoming increasingly plain that Thai military leaders were walking anachronisms, men with guns, money, American backing -- but not the prestige and public respect necessary to pull through a serious crisis with their own people. It was plain in the insulting terms used toward them in private conversations, even in the treatment in the public media: unflattering low-angle closeups of Prapat's enormous paunch, or of him sleeping, jaws agape, at public ceremonies.

In retrospect historians may conclude that the king himself gave the final crucial blessing to the forces of change, in a talk in late September to the students of Chulalongkorn University. The king denied reports that he had disagreed with and forbade recent student demonstrations, asserting instead, according to newspaper reports, that "the public is ready to support the students any time they see that student activities are beneficial to society." Two weeks later the constitutional movement began.

The new prime minister, Sanya Thammasak, is a widely respected civil servant, former President of the Supreme Court, and active member of the nation's Buddhist association. Though not a political figure, he has never been far from politics. His elevation to the prime ministership (the first civilian in 16 years) signifies a new role both for the king, with whom he has had a long and close association, and for the ever-broadening segments of the public whose strivings for political participation have for many years been denied. Sanya has promised a constitution within six months and elections within nine. The interim cabinet contains only two generals among the top positions.

The major question now is how far the new civilian leadership will be permitted to progress toward the kind of democratization which is long overdue for a country of Thailand's wealth, literacy and political sophistication. Constitutional rule is anathema to powerful institutional forces in Thailand, because it would place limits on the self-aggrandizement which many have come to expect as part of a career of public service. A key figure to watch will be General Kris, who saved the country from certain civil war on Monday.

The coming internal struggle will be complicated by one important fact. Much of the country's surplus now being drained off into official pockets flows not through the mechanism of bribes but via the heretofore accepted device of appointing officials to

positions as advisors or board members of private firms. The model for this quasi-institutionalized protection racket was Marshal Prapat, chairman of the board of the Bangkok Bank among many other positions. It may be hard for those readers who live in countries where the government is in principle the servant of the people to understand what is at stake where the government is considered to be the private property of the rulers, to be passed on (e.g. to Narong) as an inheritance. A few numbers may be instructive. When the former prime minister, Field Marshal Sarit, left the scene in 1963, the government confiscated his estate in Thailand, which amounted to \$140 million. (He started as a poor boy from the poverty-stricken Northeast.) Even this stupendous sum would not have come to public attention but for a court squabble among some of his sixty-odd wives over the division of the estate. The papers of the last few days are just starting to put Prapat's wealth together. One single item, the shares of the Bangkok Bank in the name of him and his wife, amount to \$2 million; the size of his cash accounts with the bank have not yet been revealed. It is now revealed that Narong, on a lieutenant colonel's pay, had just bought two acres of land in the prime business district of Silom Road for \$1.65 million. It is also known that Prapat and Narong owned vast tracts of land of immense value on the edge of Bangkok. The phone directory, which lists lines not by user but by the owner of the house, shows for Bangkok alone eleven homes for Prapat and his wife and seven for Thanom and his wife.

If the new leadership of Prime Minister Sanya promises to meet difficulties in democratization, no fewer problems lie ahead in unscrambling the country's economic situation and in realigning foreign policy. The combined effects of American military spending and strong foreign investment have withdrawn attention and urgency from Thai agriculture for many years, with the result that the latter is in a shambles due to endemic monopoly practices, inadequate rural education, and weak government research and extension services. (It had just been revealed in the September 6 issue of the Financial Post that all the paperwork had been prepared, and was just waiting for signature, to shut off the complete market for fertilizer imports and turn it over to a combined Thai-Japanese monopoly which would have sole rights to deal in the product.) The average Thai farmer is heavily in debt, with a consequent rise in landlessness and increase in rural unrest. Declining American military spending is already beginning to unmask this structural problem, among others, in the economy.

The changing American role will be important in another context as well. Even under the now-defunct military regime Thailand was attempting to adjust to the new power realities in Southeast Asia: the ambiguous ceasefire in Vietnam, the coalition in Laos, the increasing role of China and Japan in regional affairs. The prominent use, or abuse, of American weapons and American-trained units in the carnage of the past week may well put pressure on the new Thai leaders to move even faster in the direction of disengagement from the tight embrace of the U.S. There has already been a public outcry over this use of American weapons.

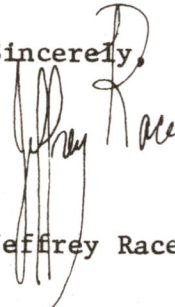
A spokesman for the U.S. military command here, when questioned on this point, declined to give any comment, referring me instead to the Embassy Press Attache. While I have not been able to get in touch with him, I did speak to one of his assistants the other day, who told me that the problem has come up frequently before. The standard answer, and I think a perfectly honest one, is that the U.S. gave these weapons to Thai leaders to kill different people from the ones they actually killed on Sunday and Monday.

The American Embassy's candor on this point is commendable. It makes perfectly clear the kind of society that the U.S. is aiming for in Thailand. The guns are to be used

on poor farmers, on hilltribesmen who are despoiled of their rights just as were the American Indians, on urban workers (the special riot training given to the police); in short, on any low-status, low-income people who assert themselves to gain greater participation in politics or in economic affairs. When the guns were turned on college students, that is, on the aspiring members of the elite who were equally kept out of power by the military regime's abolition of the constitution, the U.S. was horrified. There was not even any of the usual doubletalk about opposition to violent methods of political change, the standard justification for U.S. assistance to dictators. The gentleman at USIS simply and straightforwardly said they had used the guns to kill the wrong people.

It is possible that the shock, the enormity of what has just happened will alert Thai leaders to this sad perversion of American assistance, which is meant, according to the founding documents, to be a vehicle of uplift and humanitarianism. If Thailand is fortunate, the melancholy events of October may propel the nation out of a 40 year interregnum and into fulfillment of the great ideals of the 1932 revolution.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Jeffrey Race', with a large, stylized initial 'J' and 'R'.

Jeffrey Race

P.S.: On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday there was not a single policeman to be seen in Bangkok; all traffic was directed by Boy Scouts. The few policeman remaining in the stations wore civilian clothes. According to the papers the first few policeman to appear on the streets this morning to direct traffic were assaulted by the public and had to withdraw.

Received in New York on October 23, 1973.



The peaceful march of 400,000 citizens protesting the arrest of thirteen constitutional activists





The caption of this photograph reads: The leader of the suicide squad, who went to beg the tanks not to shoot the people and who threw a tangerine on a tank [implication in Thai: as a gesture of friendship to the soldiers]. He was riddled by dozens of M-16 and machine gun bullets and part of his head was blown off. His comrades paid homage to his dead body; they then covered themselves and the national flag with his blood and ran toward the tanks so that they too could be shot.



This kind of scene ↑ led to this kind of scene ↓



Students hit the deck on Raidamner Avenue in a bid to escape rifle and machinegun fire.